DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 933 CS 205 575

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TITLE Technical Writing as a Liberal Arts Skill.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (11th, Dearborn, MI, April 10-12, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *Course Content; Course Descriptions; *Course Objectives; Education Work Relationship; Expository Writing; Higher Education; Liberal Arts; *Technical Writing; Writing (Composition); Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A course in technical writing has justification for appearing in a college English department curriculum if course content as it is currently taught is somewhat modified. In general, business or technical writing has been primarily a study of a wide variety of letter and report writing forms. To be taught as a liberal arts course, a technical writing course should aim at instilling the same competencies and values as would any good composition, advanced writing, classical or modern rhetoric, or other expository writing course. Course objectives should include the refinement of grammar and syntax and the distinctions between technical and nontechnical writing competencies. Technical writing competencies include mastering a few basic forms for letters and reports, using headings, captions, and other graphic aids, handling the mechanics of tabular material, and implementing the strategy of reader adaptation (presenting information in a way that is tailored to a reader's ability to receive, comprehend, and remember information). An example of reader adaptation would be separating out information that would normally be included as supportive sentences in a paragraph and itemizing the information as separate, indented support points under a topic sentence. Technical writing students should learn parallel structure and other rhetorical strategies if their writing is to be effective. (AEA)

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Technical Writing as a Liberal Arts Skill

by

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(A paper presented at the College English Association meeting, Dearborn, Michigan, 11 April 1980.)

If 95 percent of all business -- technical writing consists of traditional words and structures, as several writers have observed, then fundamentally there is little difference between the composition taught in business and technical writing courses and the composition taught in liberal arts programs. In common classroom practice, unfortunately, the truth of this assertion would be hard to see. For if most classes in business and technical writing follow the formats of most business and technical writing textbooks, the instructors would ignore rhetorical skills per se and concentrate on an endless variety of writing forms.

In letter writing, for example, there would be forms for application letters, grievance or complaint letters, redress or settlement letters, inquiry letters, reply letters, congratulatory letters, condolence letters, invitational letters, acceptance and rejection letters, good news letters, bad news letters, and persuasive letters.

In report writing, the forms are even more diverse, and some courses try to acquaint students with the gamut, including preliminary reports, partial reports, interim reports, final reports, experimental reports, trade reports, formal reports, design reports, failure reports, industrial reports, evaluative reports, inspection reports, memorandum reports, periodic reports, information reports and committee reports -- and I've probably forgotten to include more types than I've remembered to mention.

But the point is that the texts, and the courses whose syllabi follow such texts, view writing ability as familiarity with virtually every stock form ever known to have been used. And this approach implies that effective writing is merely a matter of knowing which package best suits the contents that need packaging.

Such an approach, no matter how popular or widespread, is not my idea of what an effective business or technical writing course should be. Of course, I would be the last to argue that the study of forms, even cut and dried ones, is a wasted experience. On the contrary, in my view an acquaintanceship with the tried and proven ordering of a justification report is as important as is the rhetorical mode of induction. And a knowledge of the strict conventions of business letter writing can be just as rewarding, and certainly just as useful, as a knowledge of the strict conventions of the English sonnet or of the sestina. But when books and classes try to prepare students for their workaday writing responsibilities by concentrating almost wholly on these formal matters, the result is what I would call narrowing rather than broadening. It is what a purist might call training rather than education. And narrow training is simply not in line with the liberal arts.

So what must a business or technical writing course do in order to suit me? The answer here is that first, it should aim at instilling the same competencies and values as a good composition, advanced writing, classical or modern rhetoric, or other expository writing course would aim for. Perhaps the chief objective is the cultivation of an urbane literacy -- or what is called down home simply "an appreciation for the mother tongue." Very plainly, this literacy involves all the topics covered in the better composition books -- a relish for the exact word,

with attention to etymology, connotation, denotation, simplicity, concreteness, context, variety, sound, and any other quality affecting suitability. It involves grammar and syntax -- subjects of perhaps greater concern to the technical writer than to the ordinary writer -- and it involves a discipline for assiduously planning paragraphs and for passonately organizing a total communication. And, because the audience for the business letter or technical report is typically more conservative in usage matters than we English teachers are, it involves fine discrimination between such confused pairs as continuously and continually, further and farther, ensure and insure, deteriorate and degenerate, oral and verbal, imply and infer, and respectfully and respectively, as well as an informed handling of punctuation and spelling. In short, the business or technical writing course should shore up, round out, and drive home the very points that are made in any other college level expository writing course.

The second aim of a suitable undergraduate course in bus-tech writing would be to point up those remaining 5 percent differences between bus-tech writing and ordinary writing. Although small in percentage, these different writing competencies are what distinguish the tutored writer for business and industry from the untutored. They are the competencies that enable the liberal arts graduate, schooled perhaps in classical rhetoric, to accommodate his writing abilities to the needs of the workaday world. Far from being mere training, however, when taught appropriately they are as liberalizing, and as ennobling, as the ethical concerns of classical rhetoricians. And what are these competencies?

They are too numerous and too complex to be adequately covered here, but I will mention several and illustrate one in order to acquaint you with the type of special competencies of which I speak.

A few basic forms for letters and reports would, of course, be among the special competencies. Another is the use of headings or captions to label the major divisions of a long text, provide psychological eye-relief, and facilitate information retrieval -- a strategy that requires not only a precise organization of the paper and a discriminating ability to coordinate and subordinate, but also a masterful handling of parallelism. Another competency is the use of graphic aids, or the simplifying of data with such pictorial aids as photographs, line drawings, charts, graphs, and maps; in this respect, at least, the bus-tech writer parts company with the traditionalist who believes in the Oriental adage that a picture is -- and so forth. Moreover, the technical writer must also have a more consistent plan for handling mechanics, especially numbers, than most other writers would, so an appropriate course would accommodate this subject accordingly. And still another distinction is that such a course would emphasize separation and itemization, or, in other words, the strategy of presenting information in a way that is tailored to people's ability to receive, comprehend, and remember information. This competency is often called "reader adaptation," and it is this competency that I will quickly illustrate.

Consider, then, that if the topic for a paragraph were represented in a writer's outline by a Roman numeral, and if the support or amplification of that topic appears in his outline as five capital letters, an ordinary expository writer would likely write a paragraph encompassing the topic

sentence, the necessary background or contextual information, and all five points represented by the capital letters in the outline. If he devoted a sentence to each of the seven points, and if his sentences ran to the eighteen-word average found in the writing of most college graduates, then he would have a paragraph of about 14 lines.

"So what," you might say; McCrimmon holds that completing one idea is the function of a paragraph, irrespective of its length. And, you might add, "I wish I could get my boneheads writing such well developed paragraphs. Most of them nowadays do well to squeeze out three-sentence paragraphs." But technical writers would sympathize with your students on this point.

Technical writers remember Murphy's Law when writing paragraphs -- that is, if anything can go wrong, it will. They adapt Murphy, however, so that the adage goes, "If a reader can possibly get confused by my prose, he will." So technical writers, in their effort to convey one meaning and only one meaning in what they say, do not like to write long paragraphs. In other words, they do not like to embed information. And the reason they do not is they are afraid their readers will miss the information or confuse it.

Therefore, using the same outline in our example, a technical writer would ignore the conventional approach toward paragraph development, which may result in intimidating and sometimes confusing lengthiness. And he would consider at least two alternatives. First, he would ask himself if six short paragraphs would work best -- one for the topic sentence and its background statement and five more one-sentence paragraphs for

each of the points represented by A, B, B, C and E. Second, he would consider if one paragraph would be better, but one in which each of the five support points would be itemized -- that is, indented and numbered or indented and lettered. And, while debating this second strategy, he would ask himself if numbering or lettering would imply a rank when in fact no rank is intended. If no rank is intended, then he would ask himself if dashes or inked-in lower case o's would be better as textual delineators since these devices imply no rank.

But if the technical writer decided that itemization of the five points were for some reason preferable to five short paragraphs, his deliberation about rhetorical strategy would not end here. He would go on to ask himself if parallel structures would be appropriate and if each of the five support points ought to be constructed as items in series with separating commas or semi-colons, and a coordinating conjunction. Chances are, he would make such a choice. And, I believe, chances are his information would be much more clearly and precisely delivered than his McCrimmon-trained counterpart's.

Neither time nor your patience, I'm afraid, will permit me to continue elaborating on the differences between writing for business and industry on the one hand and traditional writing on the other. But before closing, I'd like to make a few general observations about business-technical writing.

First, of the 5 or so percent differences between the two types of writing I've been discussing, I've touched on only a very few -- and on these only lightly. There are many, many more -- so many, in fact, that I am hard pressed to cover them all in one semester. Yet, since students are often

uneasy about departing from the rhetorical strategies they learned in freshman composition and elsewhere, they must have explained for them that abandoning such practices is sometimes necessary in business-technical writing if the writing is to be effective. For these reasons, a course in technical writing has plenty of justification for appearing in the curriculum of a university English department.

And, finally, I'd like to note that technical writing is an attempt to accommodate ancient rhetoric to the needs of the modern age. It takes a form of discourse whose roots are in a relatively non-technological society, whose function was largely oral communication, and whose audience was people of a leisure class and modifies the form where necessary to meet highly specialized technological needs, to expedite the communication of knowledge from experts to laymen, and to serve in general the world of work. In that its lineage comes to us from Greece and Rome, its heritage is by no means an ignoble one. And if a Horace or a Quintilian were with us today, I have little doubt that either would be among the first to testify to the propriety of its innovations.